

New York Times Bestsellers

SHANNON HALE and LEUYEN PHAM

REAL FRIENDS



SHANNON HALE

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Artwork by
LEUYEN PHAM

Color by **JANE POOLE**

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First Second
New York

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER: 2016945552

EISBN: 978-1-250-16417-9

FIRST EDITION 2017
BOOK DESIGN BY LEUYEN PHAM AND ANDREW ARNOLD
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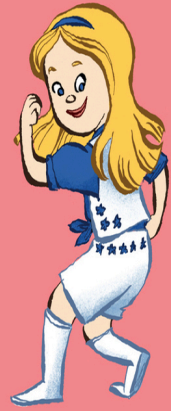
PRINTED IN CHINA BY TOPPAN LEEFUNG PRINTING LTD.,
DONGGUAN CITY, GUANGDONG PROVINCE

INKED WITH BLACK INDIA INK AND HUNT 103 NIB ON
BRISTOL PAPER AND COLORED DIGITALLY IN ADOBE PHOTOSHOP

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FOR YOU
WHEN YOU'RE FEELING LONELY AND WORRIED
SO YOU'LL REMEMBER THAT YOU'RE NOT ALONE
—S. H.

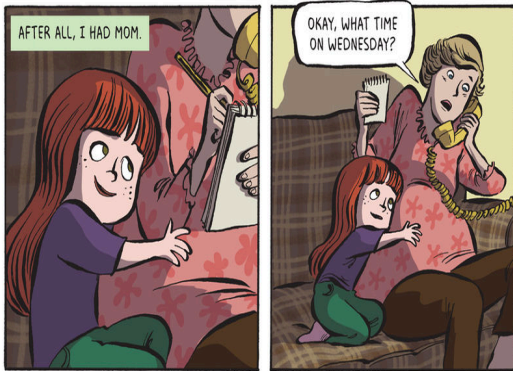
FOR SHANNON
—L. P.

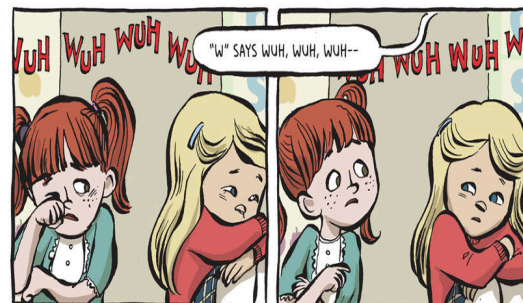


ADRIENNE

WHEN I WAS LITTLE, I DIDN'T WORRY ABOUT FRIENDS.





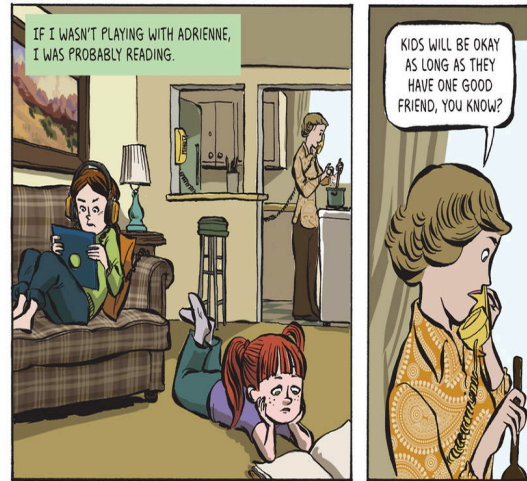




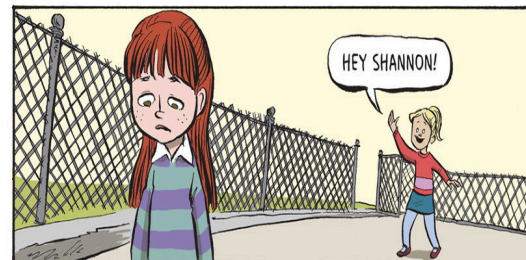
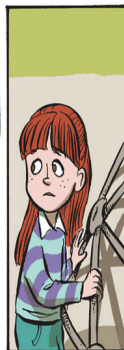
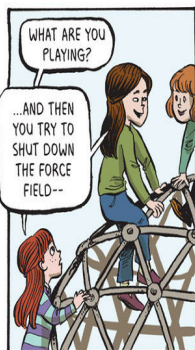


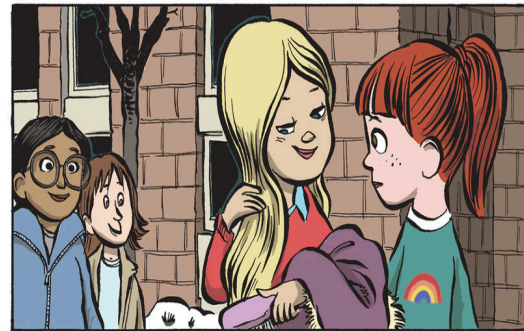
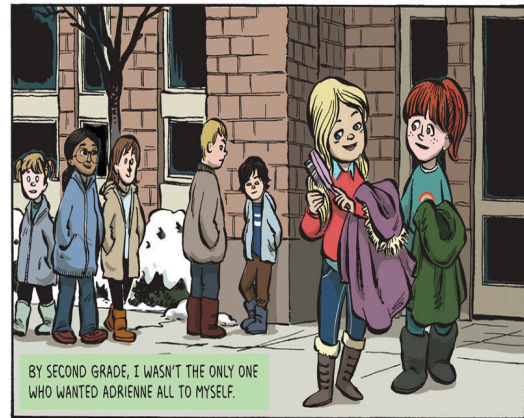


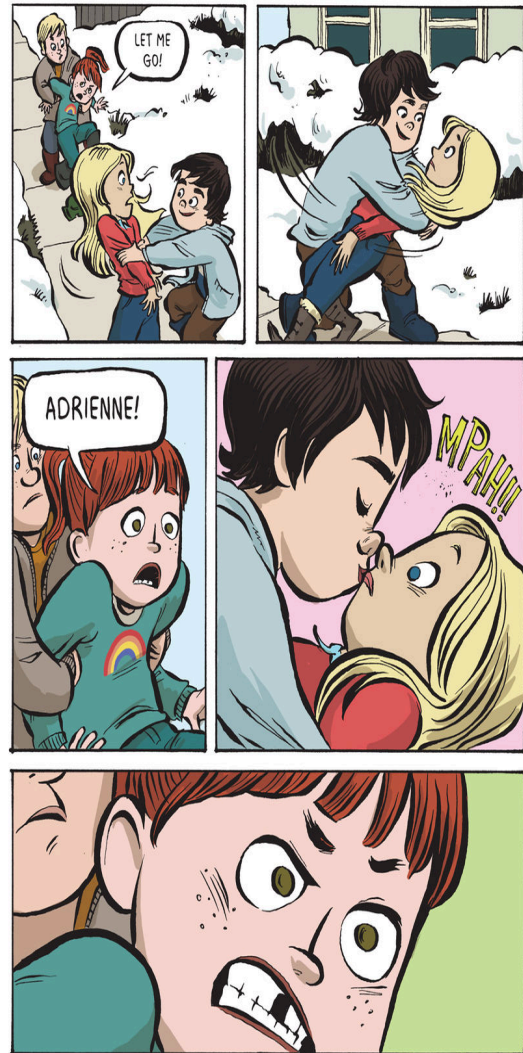
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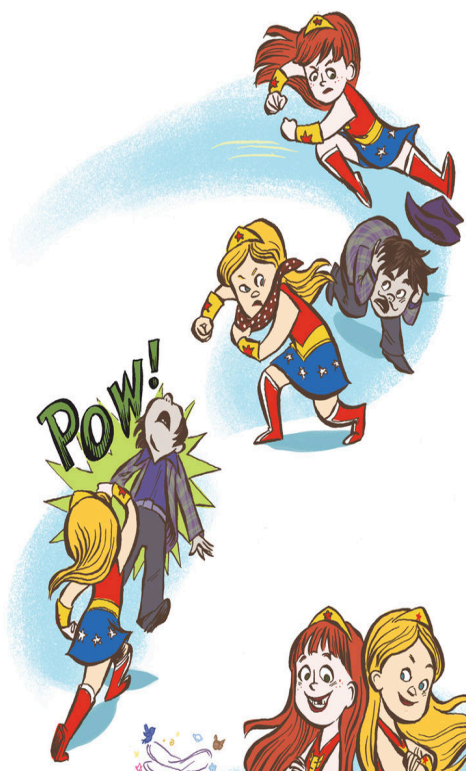


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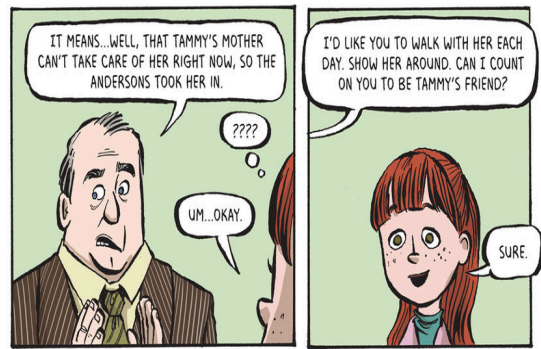
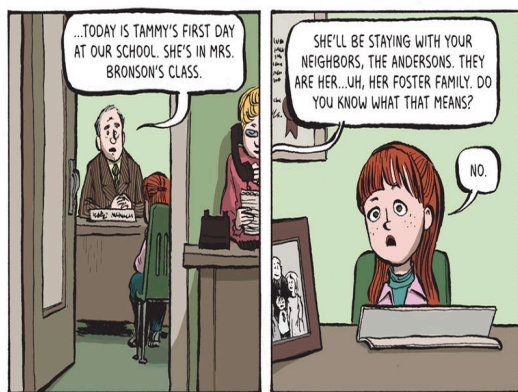
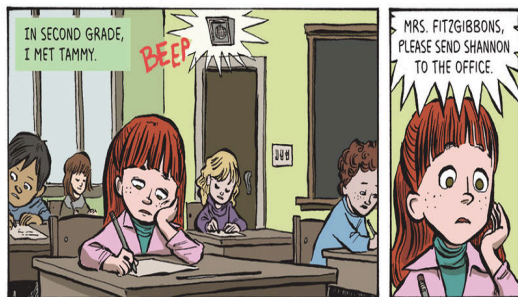
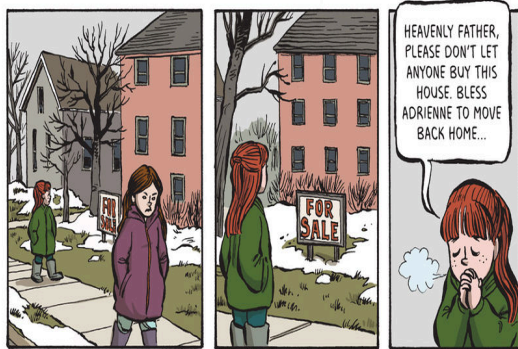




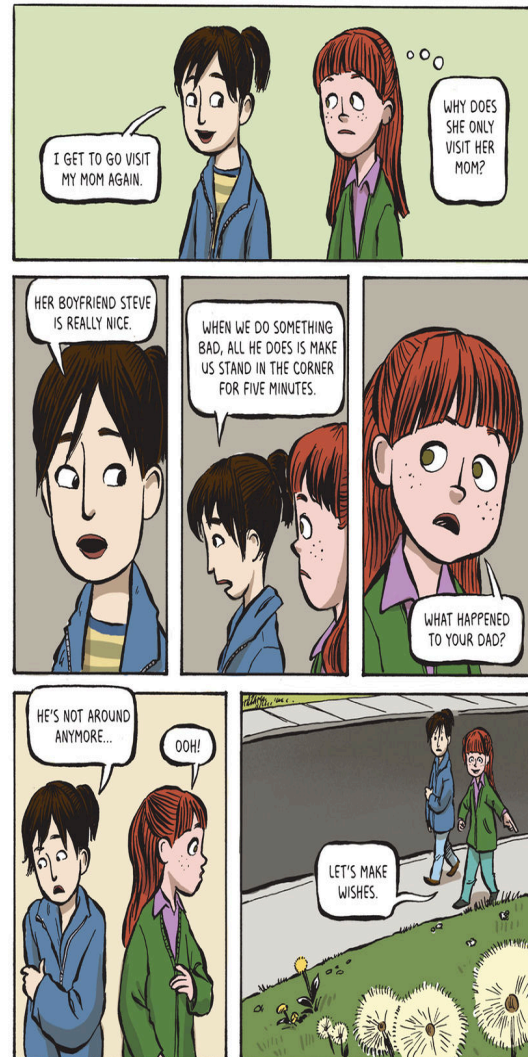


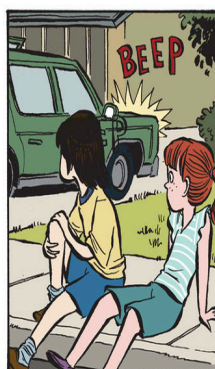
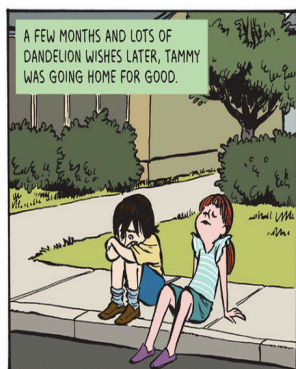






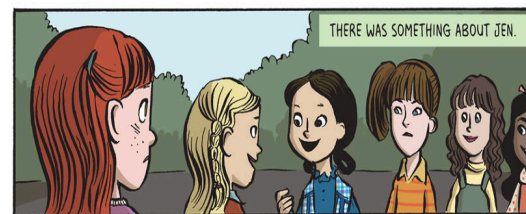
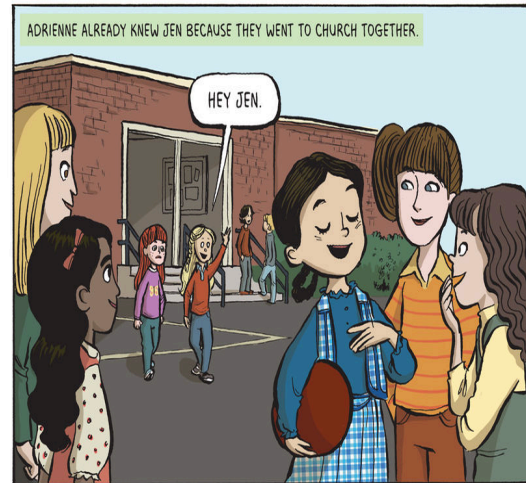


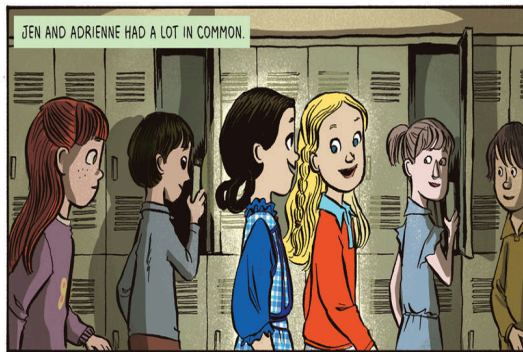
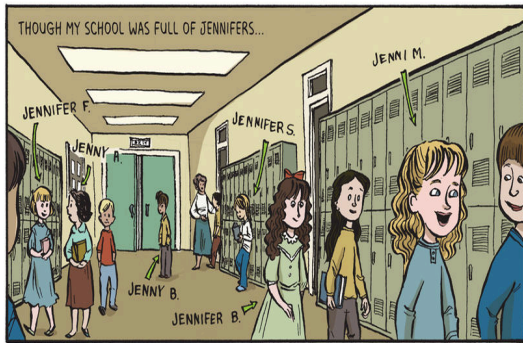






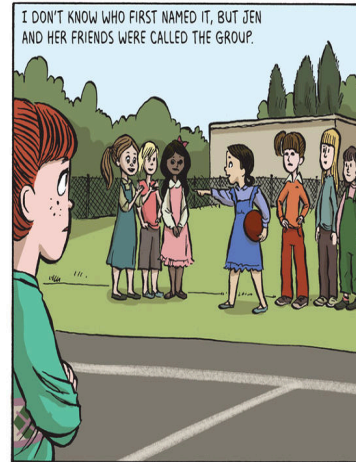
JEN

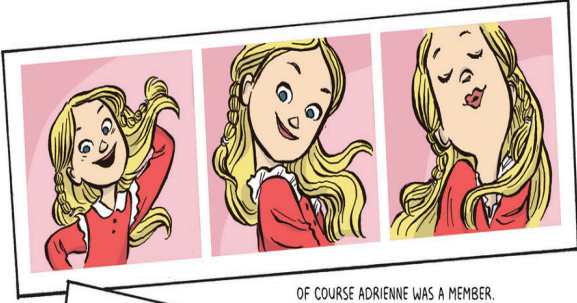




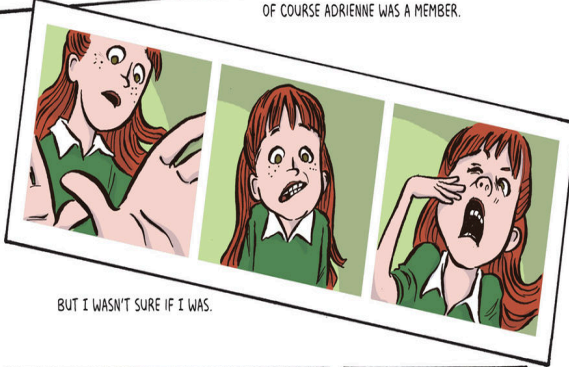
I COULD SEE WHY ADRIENNE MIGHT WANT JEN AS A BEST FRIEND INSTEAD OF ME.



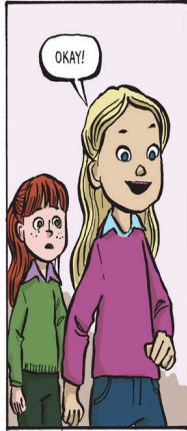




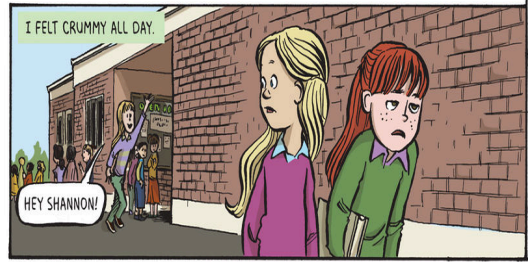
OF COURSE ADRIENNE WAS A MEMBER.



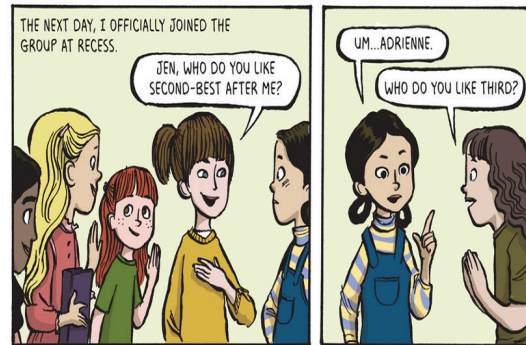
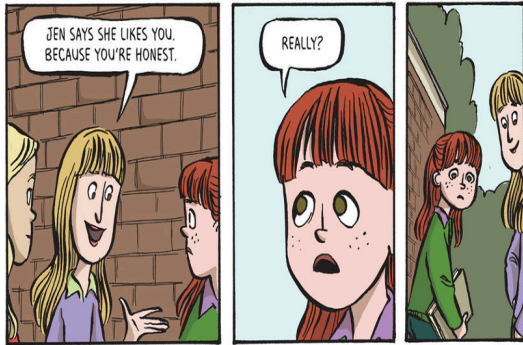
BUT I WASN'T SURE IF I WAS.



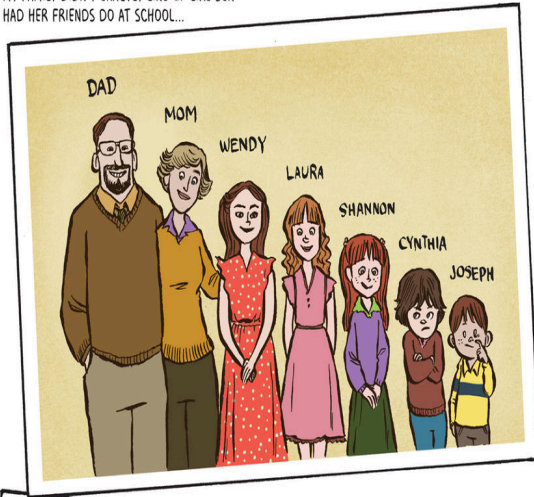
42



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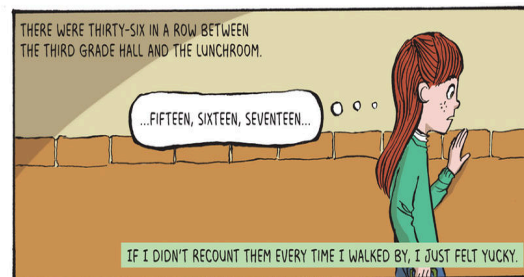
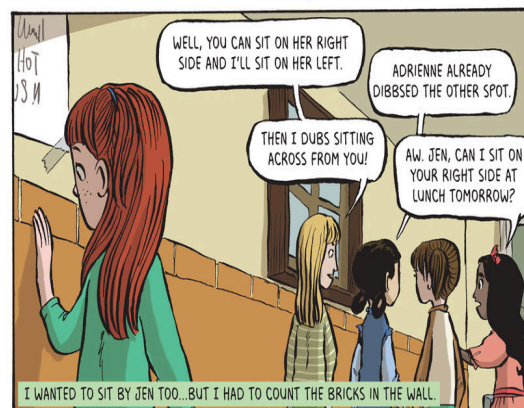
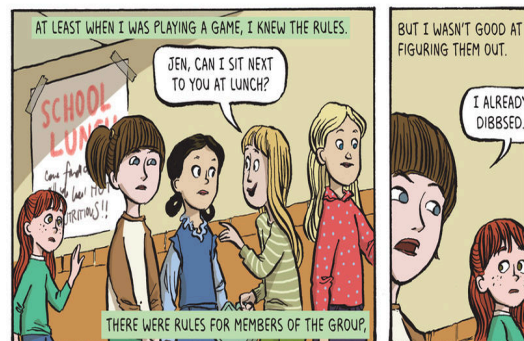


MY FAMILY DIDN'T EXACTLY LINE UP LIKE JEN
HAD HER FRIENDS DO AT SCHOOL...

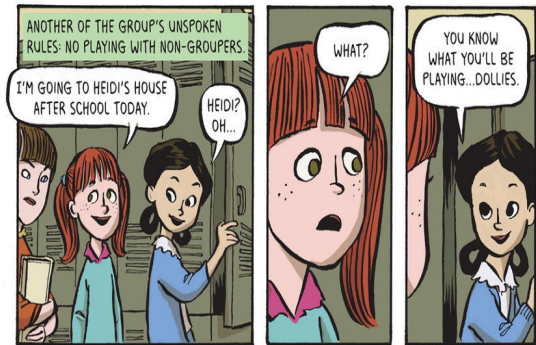
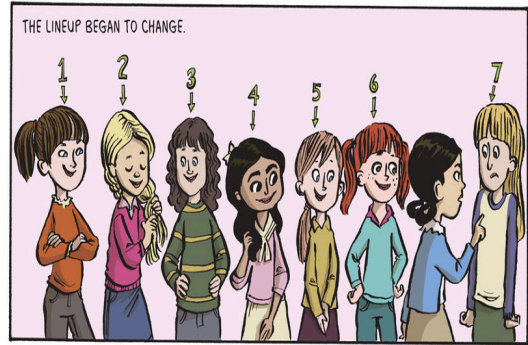


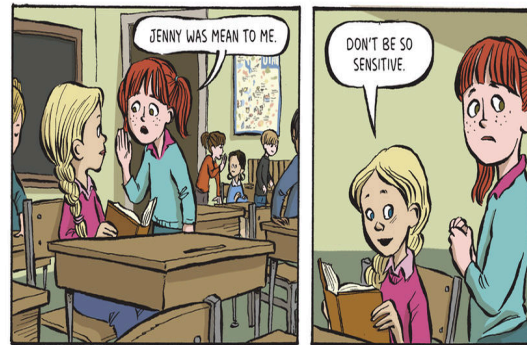
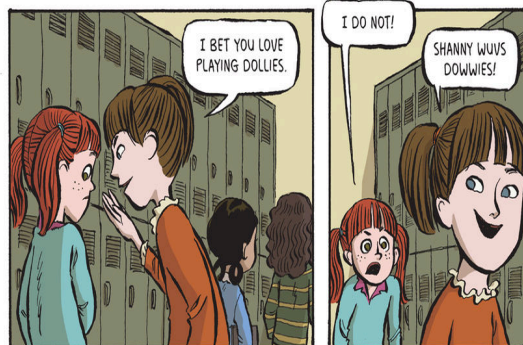
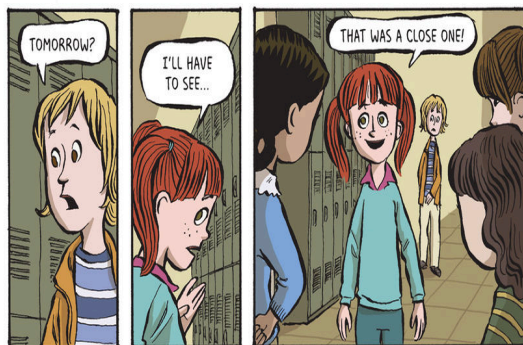
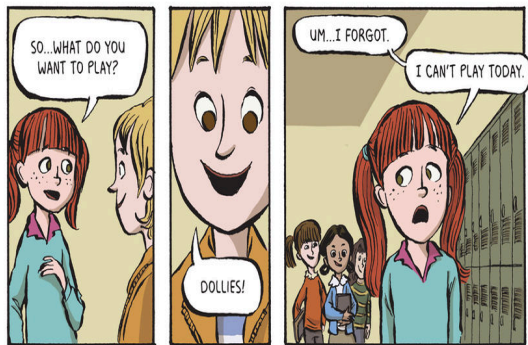
...BUT I WAS USED TO FEELING IN LAST PLACE.





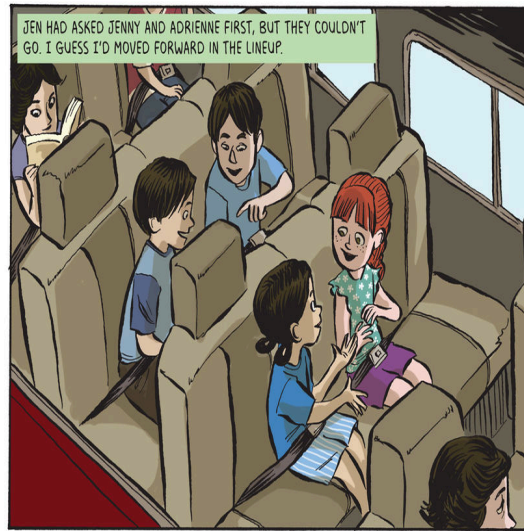
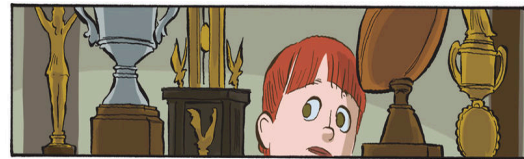








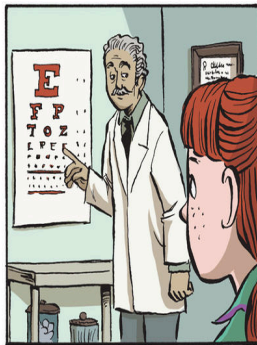
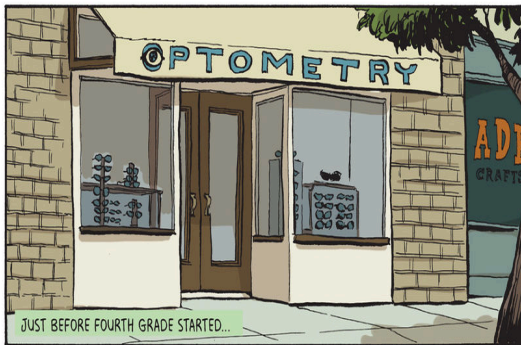






JENNY

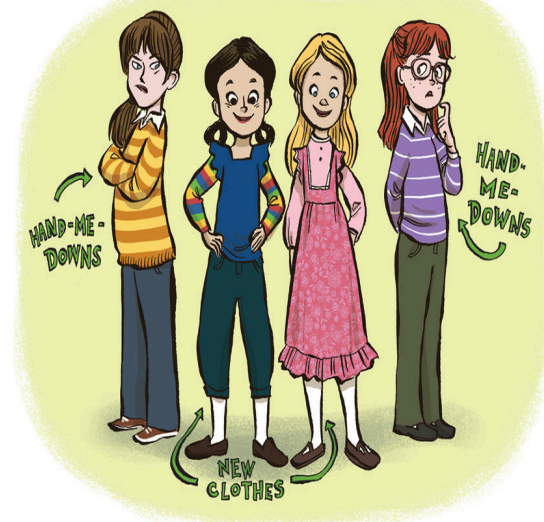






JENNY AND I HAD A LOT IN COMMON.

WE WERE BOTH SORTA POPULAR BECAUSE OF OUR MORE-POPULAR BEST FRIENDS. THOUGH HER WAY MORE THAN ME.



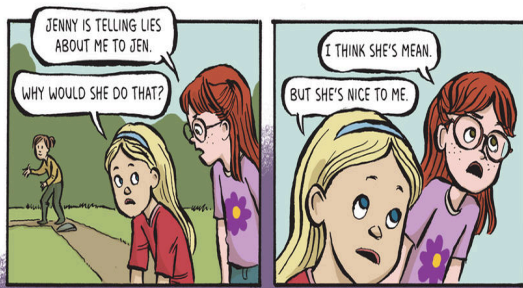
WE WERE BOTH SQUASHED-IN-THE-MIDDLE CHILDREN. I HAD FOUR SIBLINGS. JENNY HAD EIGHT.



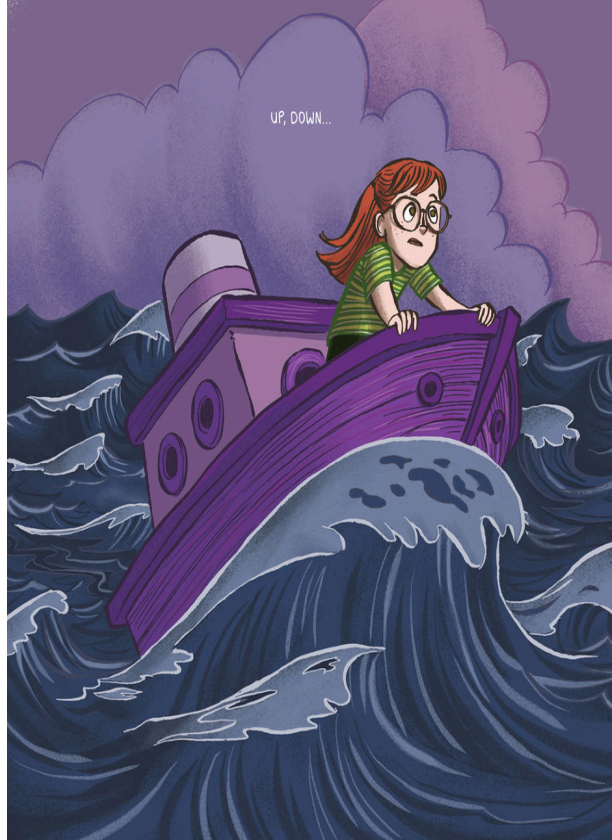
THE I HATE SHANNON CLUB ONLY LASTED ONE DAY.







I FELT TRAPPED ON A STORMY SEA...





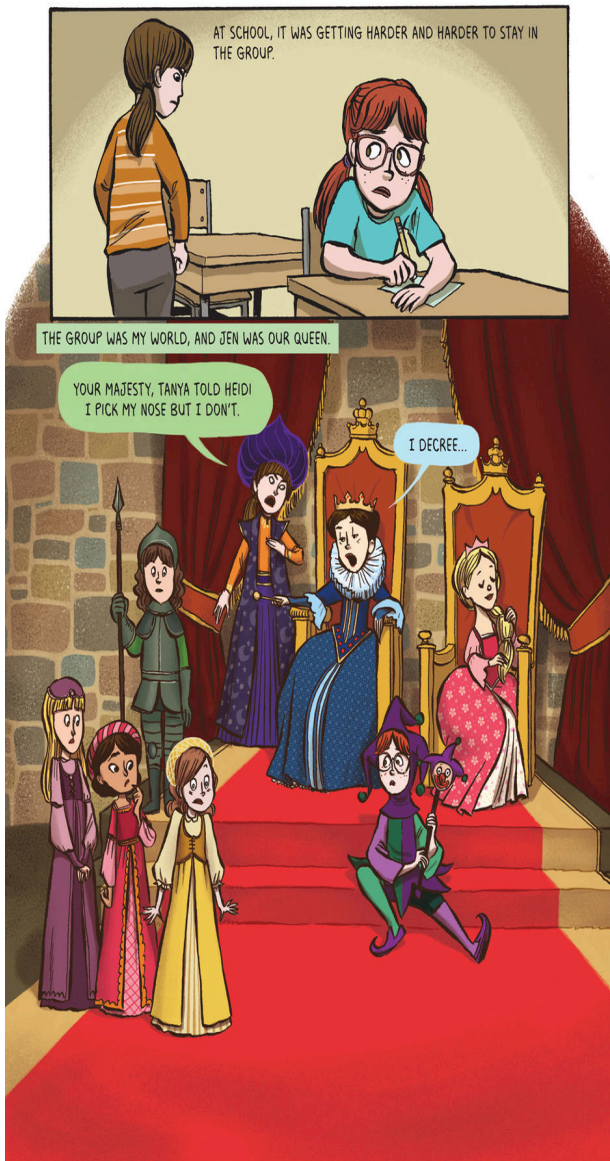




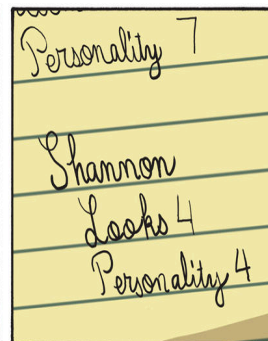
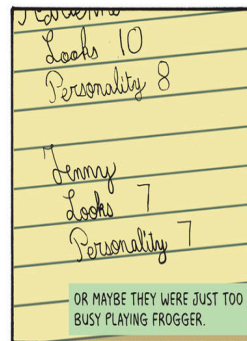
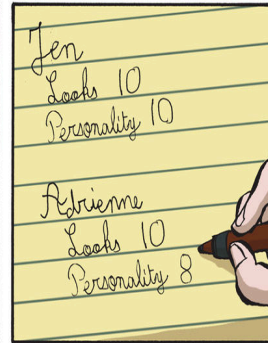
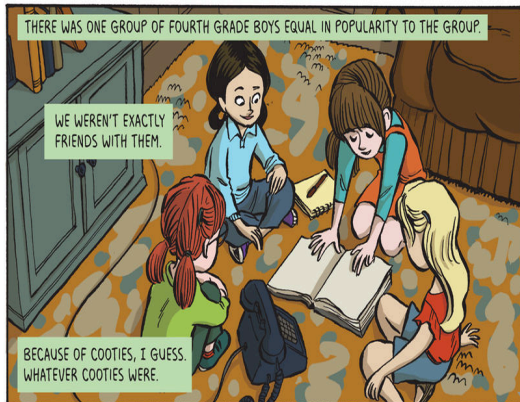
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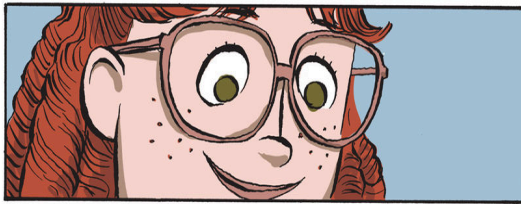




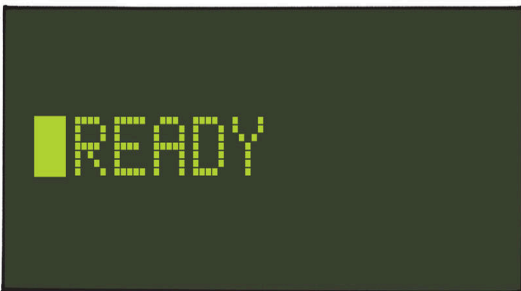
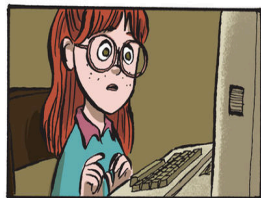




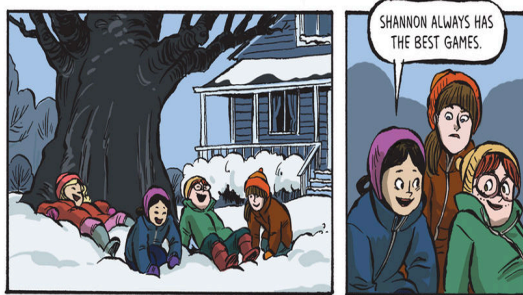


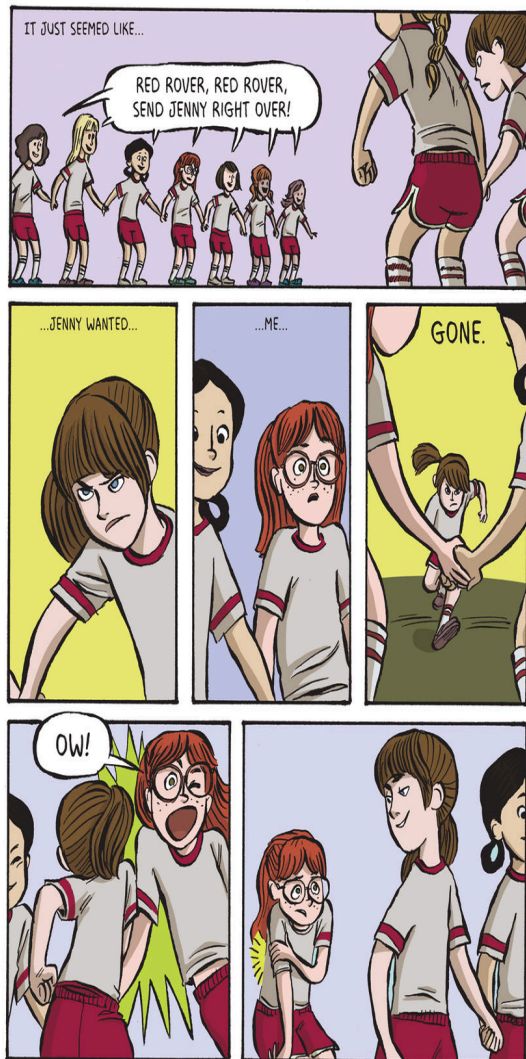


I want to be a writer when I grow up

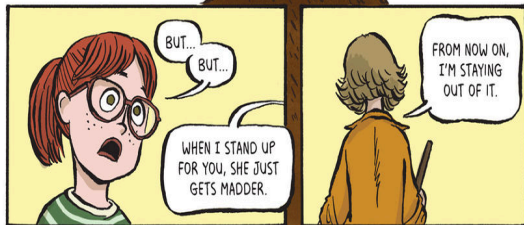


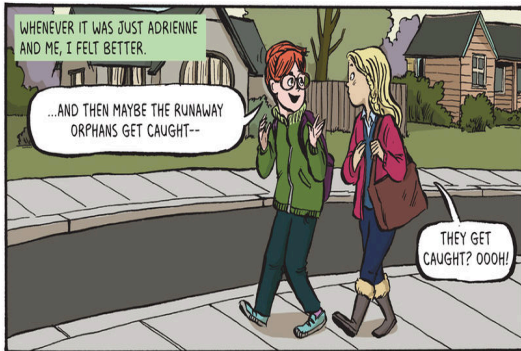
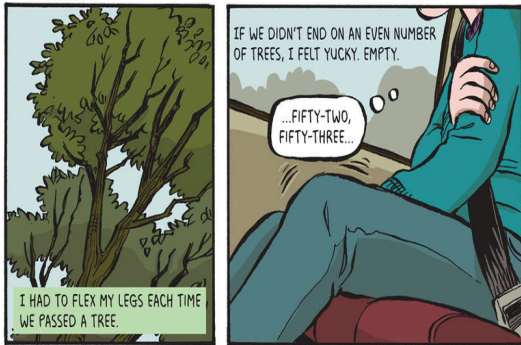








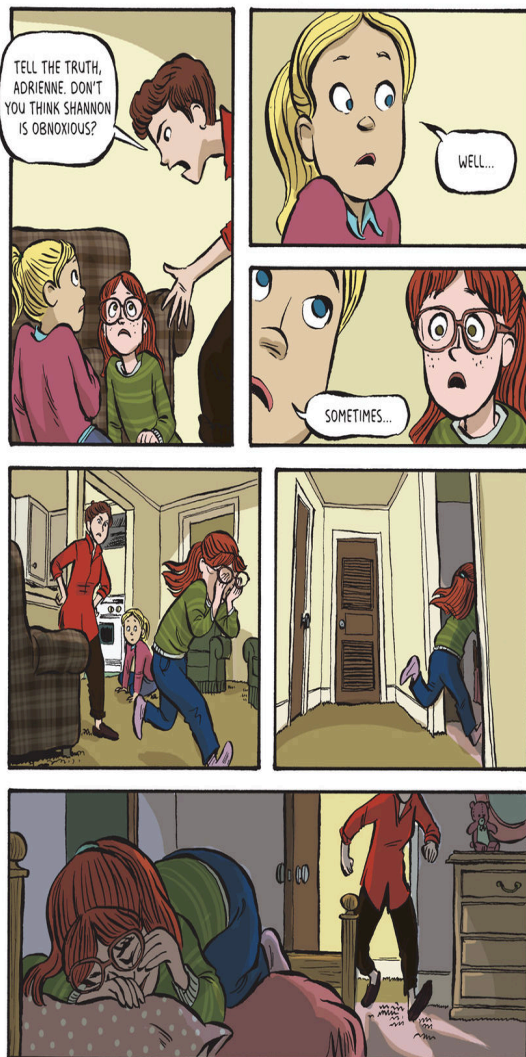


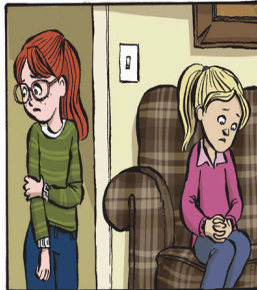
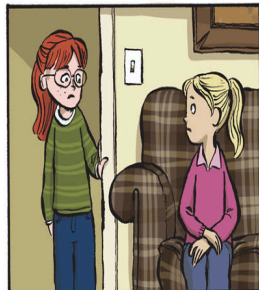
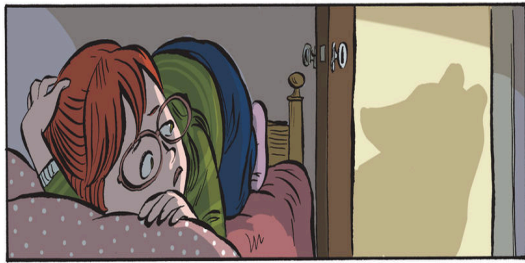


IT WAS ONE OF MY FAVORITE DAYDREAMS.



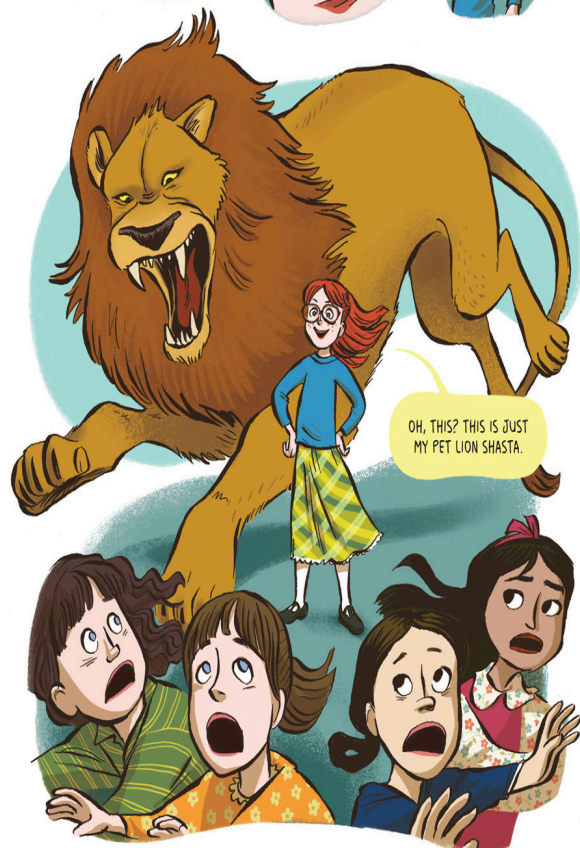






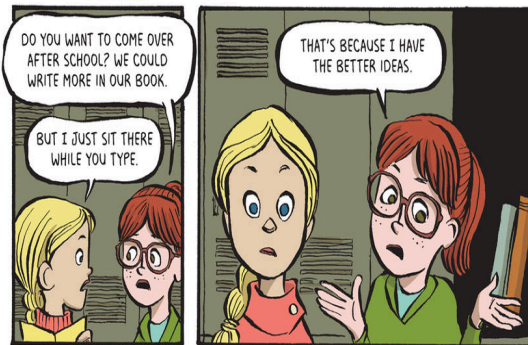
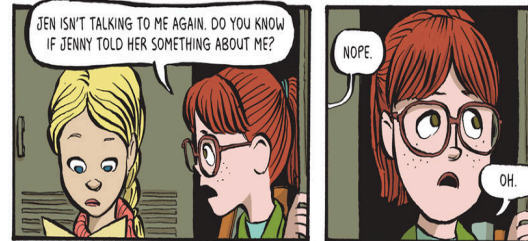


SOMETIMES I WISHED...

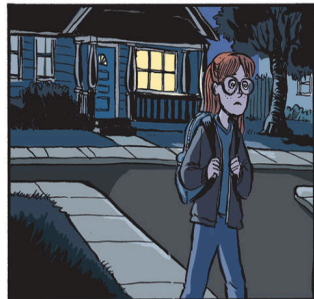
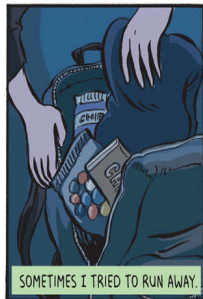
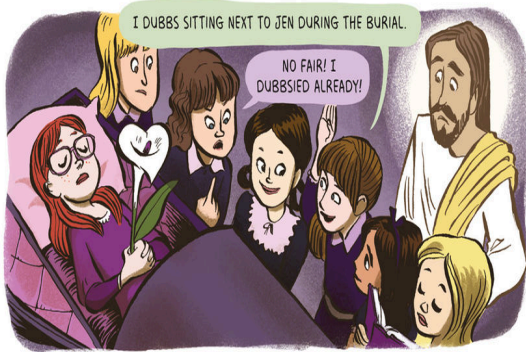


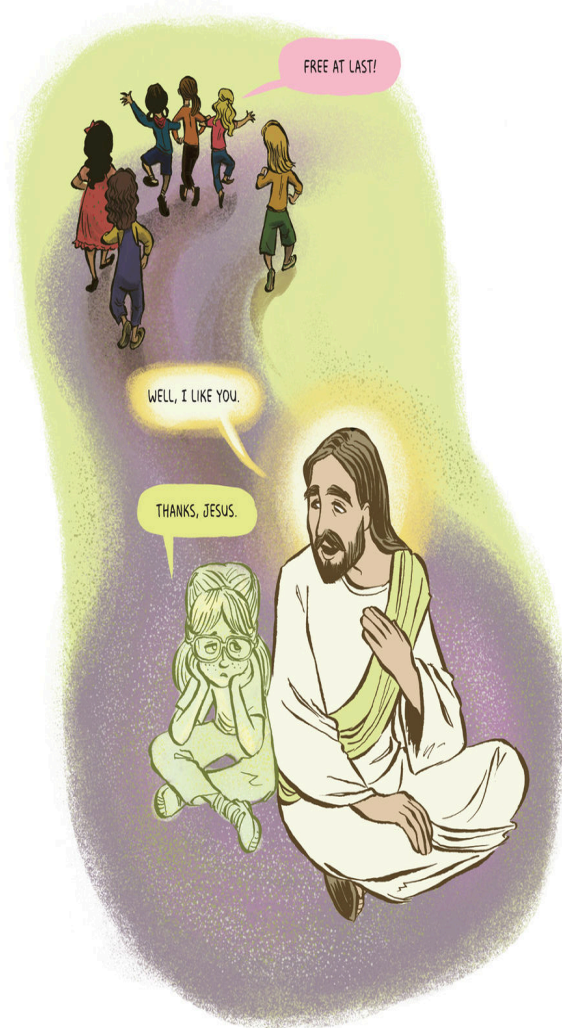


I TRIED TO TURN THIS DAYDREAM INTO A STORY...





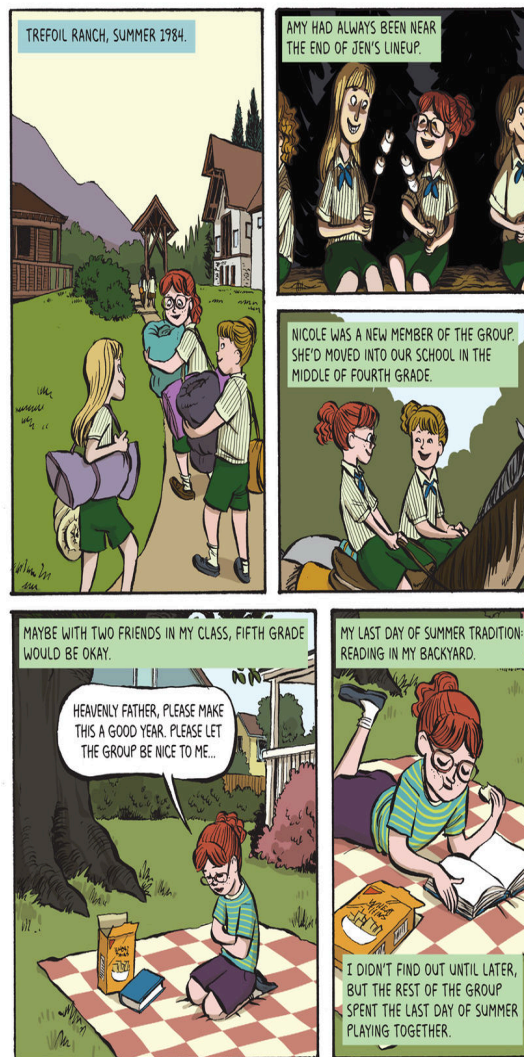




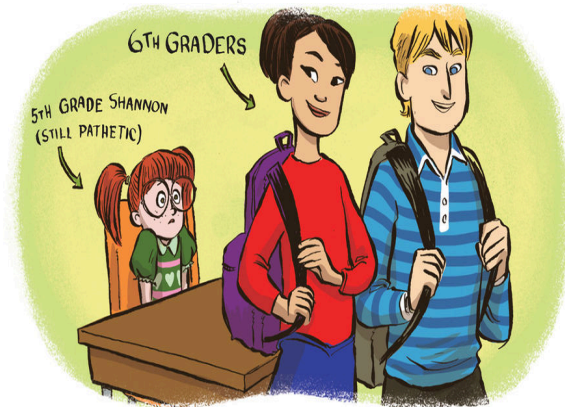
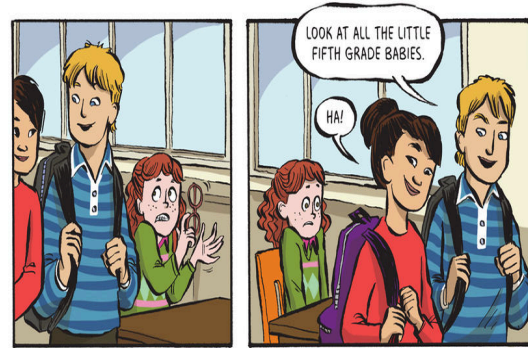
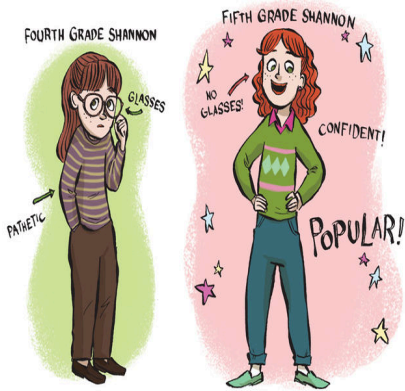
ZARA
&

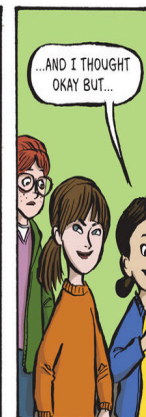
VERONICA



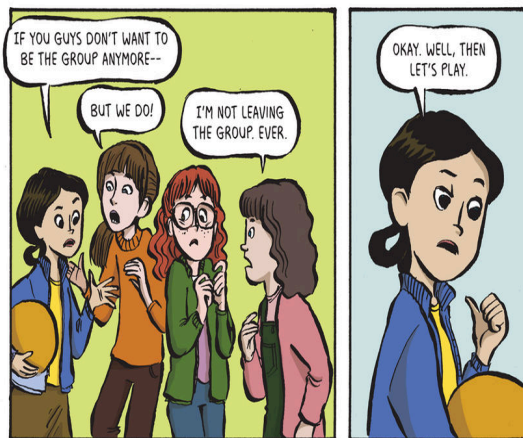
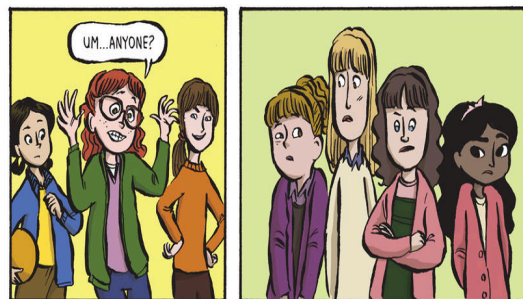


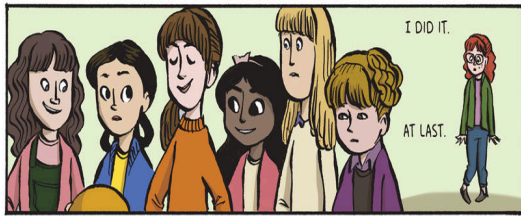
I MADE A FOOLPROOF PLAN FOR SUCCESS IN THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR.











I DID IT.

AT LAST.



VICTORY!

I WAS FINALLY FREE.



I WASN'T SURE LEAVING THE GROUP WAS THE RIGHT CHOICE.



AT LEAST I'D HAD FRIENDS.



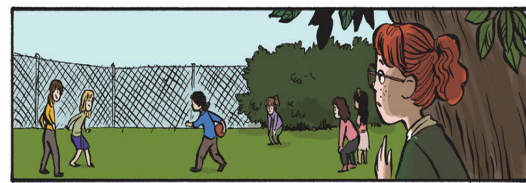
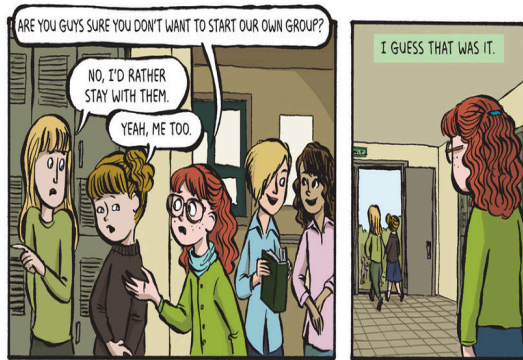
BRINNGGG



NOW SOMETIMES I WAS SO SAD I COULD BARELY BREATHE.



SO I TRIED ONE LAST TIME.



BUT I COULD IMAGINE THEM.



WHAT IS THIS PLACE?



YOUR NEW HOME!



LONG WE HAVE WAITED FOR YOU TO FIND US.

WE SEE YOU AS YOU TRULY ARE.

THE HUMANS MUST BE CRAZY TO THINK THAT YOU ARE OBNOXIOUS.

INDEED. HER COOLNESS SPARKLES LIKE A UNICORN'S HORN.



I CAN STAY FOREVER?

OF COURSE, SISTER.

HERE YOU WILL BE SAFE FROM CRUELTY.

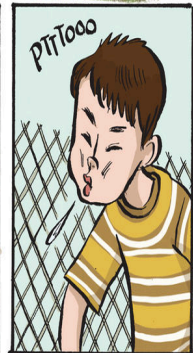


ALSO YOU HAVE MAGICAL POWERS.

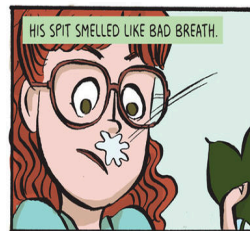
COOL.



HI?



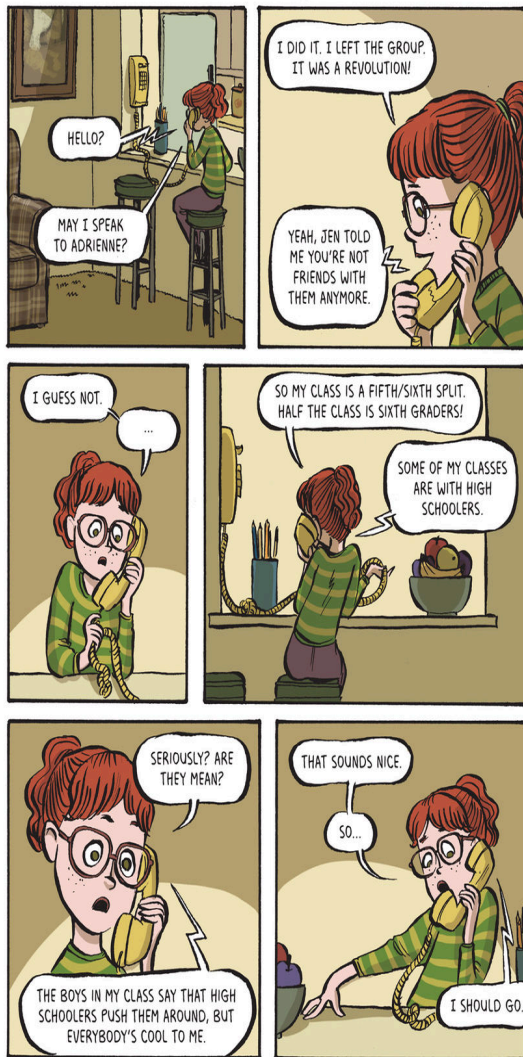
ptttoo



HIS SPIT SMELLED LIKE BAD BREATH.

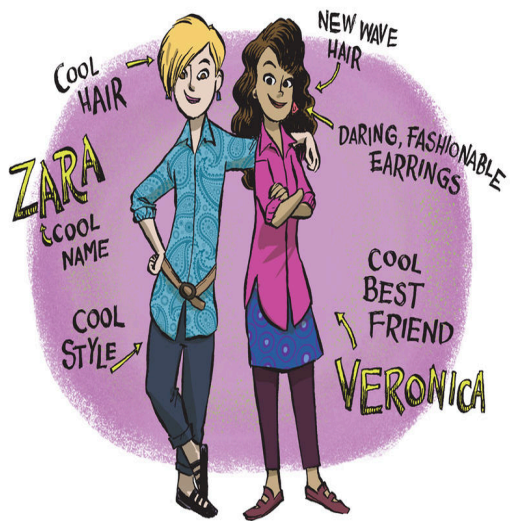


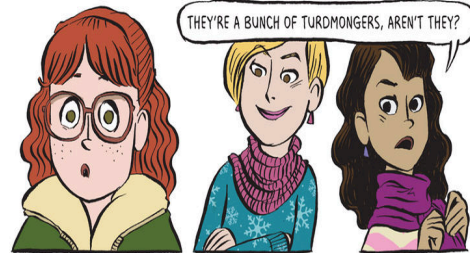
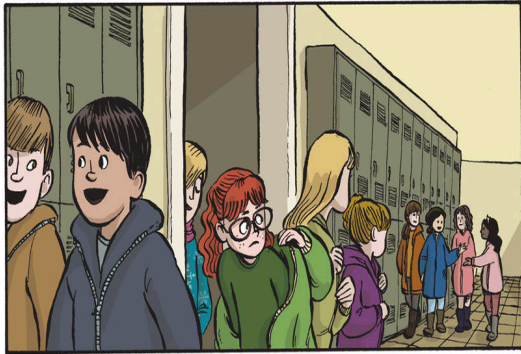




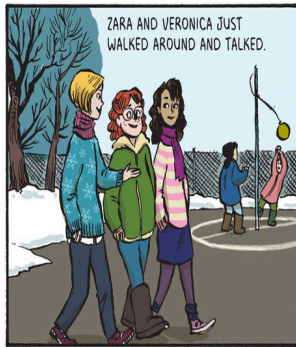












WHO NEEDS A PARKA? NOT ME!

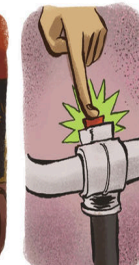




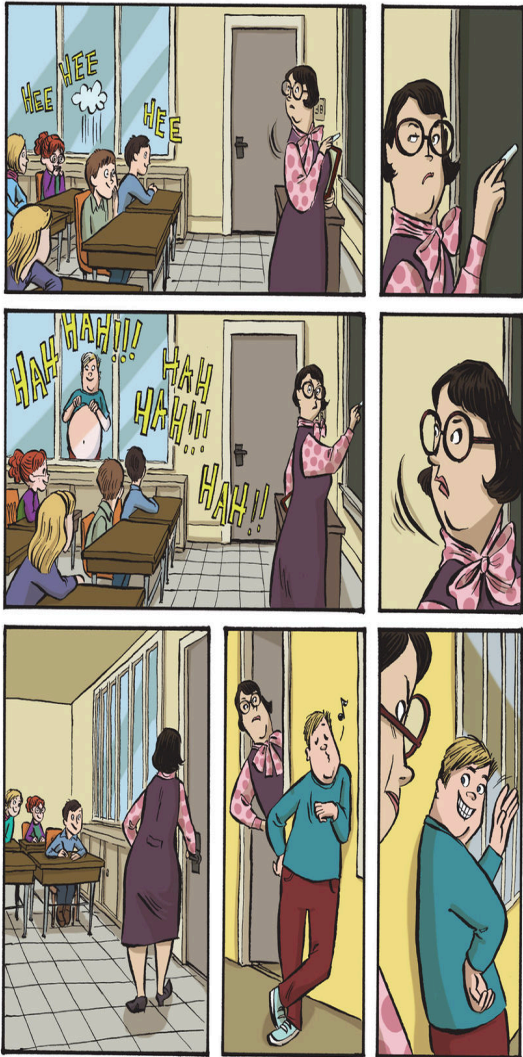


THE NEXT DAY, I RISKED BEING BABYISH AND INTRODUCED A GAME.

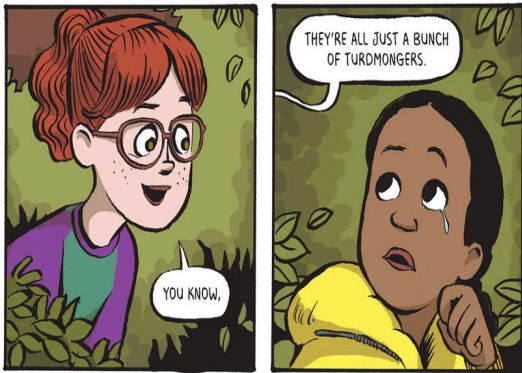








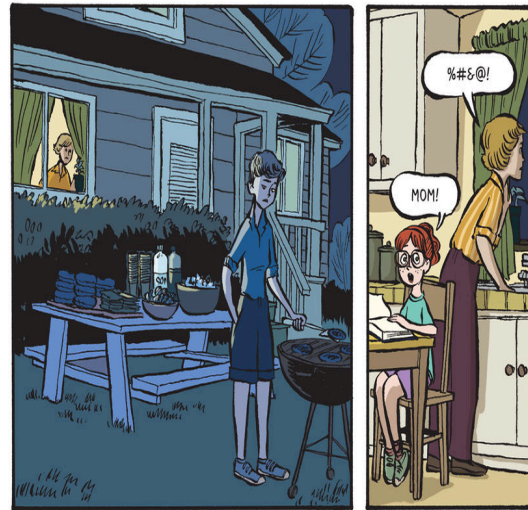
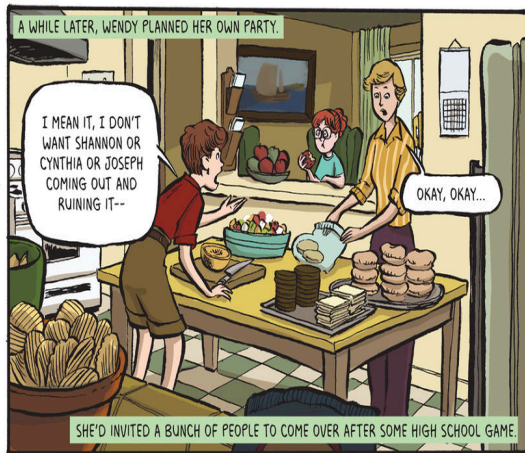




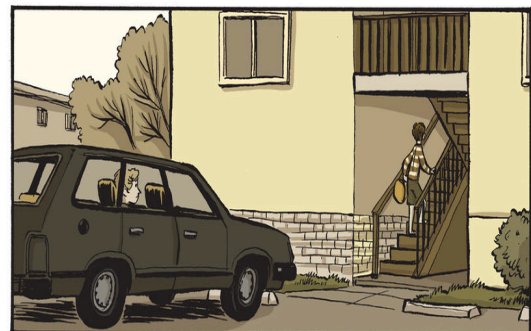
WENDY

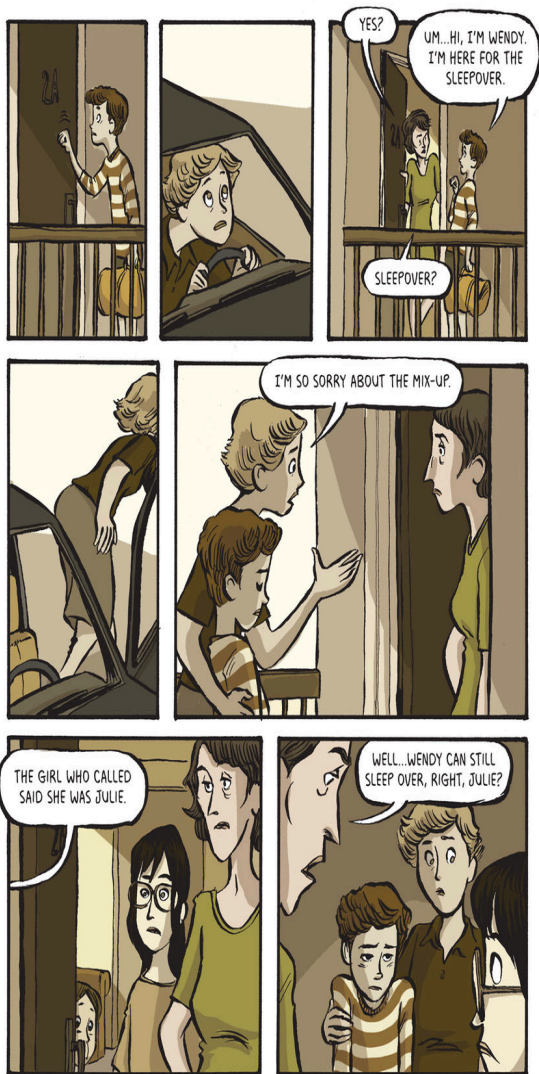






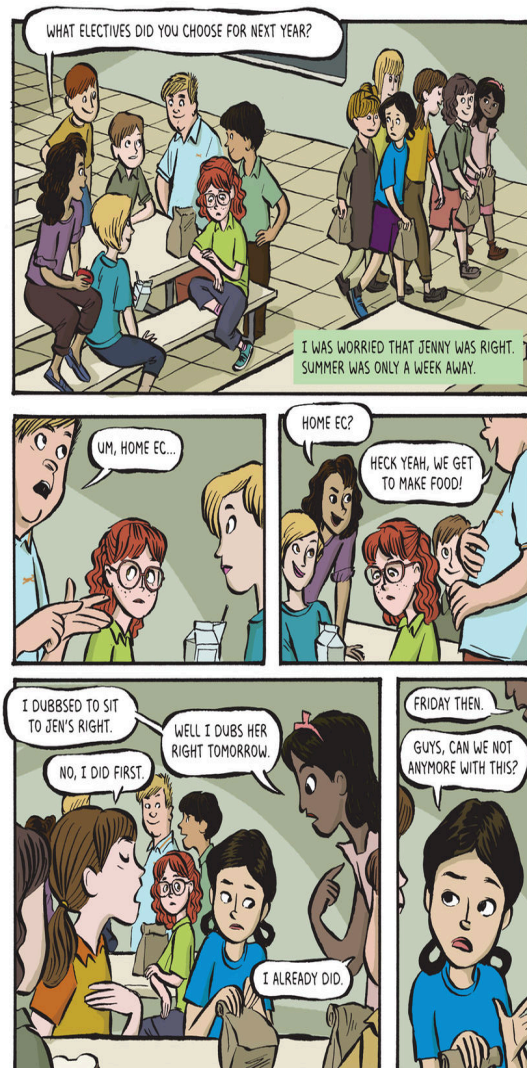




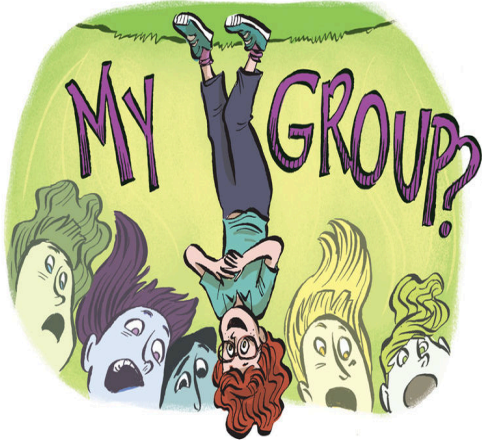








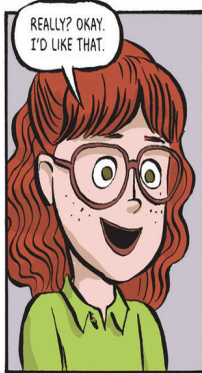




BUT ALSO...WHAT? I'D IMAGINED JEN WAS LIKE THIS...



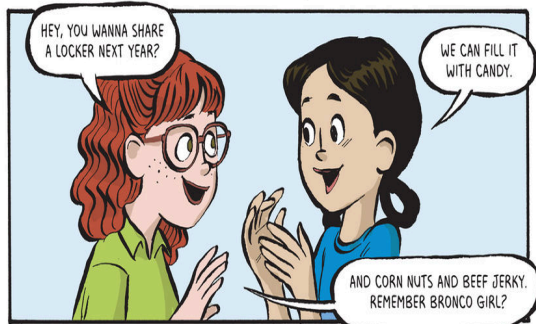
...BUT REALLY SHE WAS LIKE THIS?



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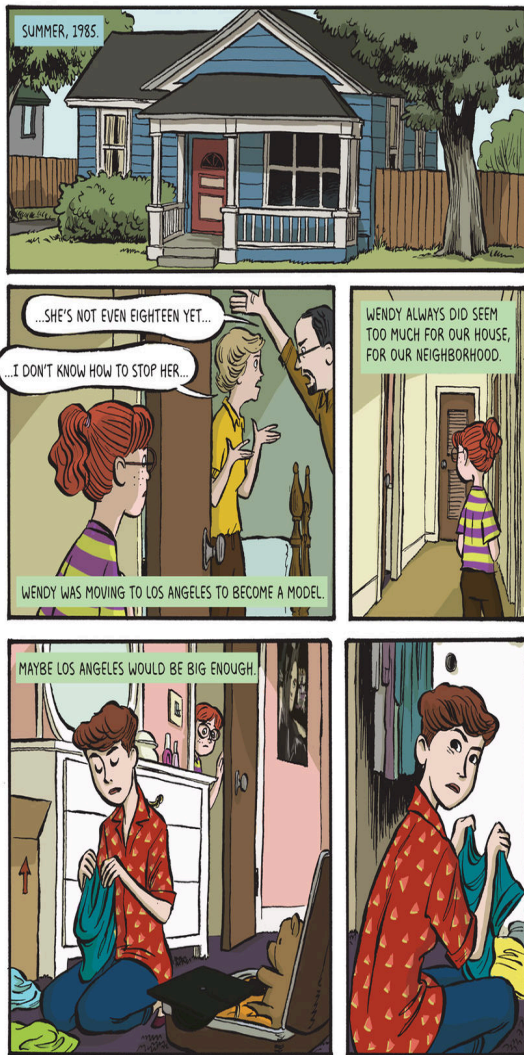
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FOR FIELD DAY, OUR NEW GROUP WENT SHOPPING FOR OUTFITS IN THE LATEST STYLES.













Once upon a time there was a girl with red hair



who believed her destiny was to ride alone.



But an old evil was rising
in the north lands.



... at the final moment, when
all seemed to be lost.

she cried out for help.

The many friends she had made
on her journey heard her call.



And they came running.



Author's Note

Some have said that memories are the stories we tell ourselves about our past. *Real Friends* is the story I've been telling myself about my elementary school years. If you were to ask the other people portrayed in this book how it happened, surely the story they've been telling themselves would be different from mine.

I never thought I would write a memoir. For one thing, I didn't have a tragic or extraordinary childhood. I had kind parents who loved me. I had friends and many good times. But I decided to write this book in order to share how those years felt to me, in case you have felt or are feeling the same way. And then we can say to each other, "Hey, me too! Isn't that something? To realize I'm not the only one?"

Most of the events in this book really happened. Or I think they did. I've learned that memories aren't 100 percent accurate, and there's so much I didn't record in my journals. But I did my best. The parts I couldn't remember exactly, I wrote as they might have happened (like the conversation where Zara and I first became friends). A few parts I changed on purpose to help the story flow (like moving up the year Wendy left home). And I renamed everyone except myself because my flawed memory can't perfectly portray real people.

If this were a fiction, I probably would have resolved the relationship with Jenny, but in real life, it was never resolved. Even though little Shannon really did say "no" when Jenny asked to join the "new group," it was still hard for me to write it. After all, I believe in forgiveness and redemption. But I chose to include it because I think it's okay to make boundaries between ourselves and anyone who has bullied us. It's okay to say no.

Though my friend troubles didn't all go away in sixth grade, as I kept growing up, it did keep getting better. In high school I got to know the girl who had been my hiding-behind-the-shrub companion. Her situation in

elementary school had been so much harder than what I'd been facing. I wonder if I could have seen her loneliness more clearly if I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own, and if we could have been friends for each other.

I was sick a lot, and though my loving mom took me to many doctors, we never figured out what was wrong. The mysterious stomachaches and some of those sad, anxious, yucky feelings were probably symptoms of an anxiety disorder and mild obsessive-compulsive disorder. Today there are lots of resources for kids with mental health disorders. Cognitive behavioral therapy is an effective tool for anxiety and OCD, and starting therapy when young can help tremendously. The website adaa.org is a helpful resource.

The sister who inspired the character of Wendy also struggled with undiagnosed behavioral health disorders. Back then, no one really knew what to do for kids whose brains worked a little differently. As she grew up, she found her own group—friends who realized how funny, clever, vibrant, and fun she was. Maybe our reconciliation in real life didn't happen as quickly as it does in this book, but it felt that way. We corresponded regularly whenever she lived out of state. She was the first person I talked to about my first kisses, my boy troubles, and my writerly dreams. As adults we became great friends, and she became a devoted, loving, brilliant mother.

She is so much more than I've been able to show in this book. As are the rest of my family; the people I call Jen, Jenny, and Adrienne; and even little Shannon. We are, all of us, so much more than we are at our worst and at our best.

Friendship in younger years can be especially hard because our worlds are small. In high school and beyond, I found many supportive, lifelong friends. If you haven't found your "group" yet, hang in there. Your world will keep growing larger and wider. You deserve to have real friends, the kind who treat you well and get how amazing you are.

Kindergarten



Awww...

2nd Grade



Here I am, looking super hand-me-down-ish and forgotten-in-the-middle child.

3rd Grade



When I first joined The Group.

4th Grade



The year I decided to be a writer.

5th Grade



My retake photo—this time without glasses!

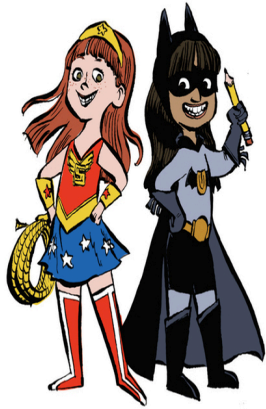
Acknowledgments

Special thanks from Shannon . . .

- to LeUyen Pham, who was exactly the right person to illustrate this book. This is as much your story as mine, Uyen. Thank you! Apologies to your family for all the long days and late nights you dedicated to this book. And cheers for Jane Poole and her magnificent help on the coloring.
- to Connie Hsu, my editor, who literally made this book possible. Thanks for taking my nonsense of a first draft and patiently talking me through twenty or so revisions until I got it right.
- to all the First Second and Macmillan folk who have taken such care of me and this book, including Gina Gagliano, Mark Siegel, Andrew Arnold, Danielle Ceccolini, Allison Verost, Erin Stein, Jon Yaged, Angus Killick, Jennifer Gonzalez, Simon Boughton, Lucy Del Priore, Katie Halata, Jill Freshney, Alexa Villanueva, and of course Connie Hsu, who I already mentioned but deserves being mentioned twice.
- to LeUyen Pham again, who is simply PHAM-TASTIC! (If that's not a thing yet, I'm going to make that a thing. You're welcome.)
- to Cece Bell, Jenni Holm, Emily Wing Smith, Aaron Hartzler, Raina Telgemeier, Coe Booth, and Sherri Smith, for the advice and inspiration.
- to the Bryner family, for the stories, the laughter, the forgiveness.
- to Ava Cabey and Avarose, Samantha Stewart, and Rebecca Jensen Maw, for friendship and insight.
- to Margaret Stohl and the YALLWEST crew, for huddling me in right when I needed it.
- and to Dean, Max, Maggie, Wren, and Dinah, who were the best beta readers in the history of the universe.

Special thanks from Uyen . . .

- to Shannon Hale. My head knows that you wrote this story. But my heart is still convinced that somehow you crawled inside my memories and handpicked all these events and feelings and insecurities from my childhood and called them your own. My husband likes to joke that if I had just swapped out the Salt Lake City neighborhoods for the Los Angeles suburbs, and your large Mormon family for my own large Vietnamese Catholic family, and lastly changed little Shannon's hair color from red to black, then this book is about me. Hopefully I've managed to crawl into your head and draw out your memories as well. You are forever a kindred spirit.
- to Connie Hsu, who went through every page, every panel, every face, and let me know when I got it just right. Like Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, we had to dance it just right, and you were the perfect dance partner. But which are you, Ginger or Fred?
- to Mark Siegel, for making me always believe I'm better than I am. It makes me never want to disappoint you.
- to the First Second and Macmillan crew, who I've worked with forever now it seems. How do you guys manage to do what you do with what little you have to do it with? I've never known a more devoted group than you. Special shout out to Andrew Arnold, who came out of nowhere and gave us that last push we needed over the finish line.
- to my colorists, Jane and Max, who pulled off the most amazing feat of labor since Hercules was challenged, and in far less time. I threw you into the deep end, and you're still talking to me. How is that possible? And I still owe you dinner . . .
- to Leo and Adrien, whose faces are still the faces of every character I draw. It is unbelievable how much I love you guys.
- to Alex. For absolutely everything.



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When best friends are not forever...

Shannon and Adrienne have been best friends ever since they were little. But one day, Adrienne starts hanging out with Jen, the most popular girl in class and the leader of a circle of friends called The Group. Everyone in it wants to be Jen's #1, and some girls would do anything to stay on top . . . even if it means bullying the others.

Now every day is like a roller coaster for Shannon. Will she and Adrienne stay friends? Can she stand up for herself? And is she in The Group—or out?

Newbery Honor author **SHANNON HALE** and bestselling artist **LEUYEN PHAM** join forces in this true story about how hard it is to find your real friends—and why it's worth the journey.

"*Real Friends* is **honest** and **heartfelt**, and sure to be loved by anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. The artwork is **stunning**, too!"

—**VICTORIA JAMIESON**, *New York Times*-bestselling and Newbery Honor author of **ROLLER GIRL**

"**Fresh, fun, and achingly real.** Bravo!"

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"*Real Friends* made me **laugh, broke my heart**, and **gave me hope.** This book is SO GOOD. SO MANY FEELS."

—**GENE LUEN YANG**, *New York Times*-bestselling and National Book Award Finalist author of **AMERICAN BORN CHINESE**

"A **rich memoir** that tells the real truth about friendship and its trials and triumphs."

—**BEN HATKE**, *New York Times*-bestselling author of **ZITA THE SPACEGIRL**



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